**Once upon a Time There Was a Man**

*Mac Hammond*

Once upon a time there was, there was a man  
Who lived inside me wearing this cold armour,  
The kind of knight of whom the ladies could be proud  
And send with favours through unlikely forests  
To fight infidels and other knights and ordinary dragons.  
Once upon a time he galloped over deep green moats  
On bridges princes had let down in friendship  
And sat at board the honoured guest of kings  
Talking like a man who knew the world by heart.  
In every list he fought, the trumpets on the parapets,  
The drums, declared his mastery, the art of arms;  
His horse, the household word of every villager,  
Was silver-shod and, some said, winged.  
Once upon a time, expecting no adventure  
In the forest everybody knows, at midnight,  
He saw a mountain rise beneath the moon.  
*An incredible beast? With an eye of fire?*  
He silently dismounted, drew his famous sword  
And hid behind the heavy tress and shrubs to see  
If what he thought he saw was real. He fled  
And the giant eye of the moon pursues him still.

Rebecca Hauk

AP Literature and Composition

December 10, 2009

Explication of Mac Hammond’s “Once Upon a Time There was a Man”

                At some point in a person’s life, the time will come when his peers’ expectations and opinions of him conflict with his perception of himself. Whether he fails the test everyone expects him to pass or misses the winning goal of his final soccer game, he has failed in some way to satisfy others’ expectations. Most people would be disappointed by this letdown, but the difference in the narrator of “Once Upon a Time There was a Man” is that he continues to attempt to live up to expectations, even though these pre-conceived notions conflict with his natural predisposition. He cannot help but strive for his peers’ approval. The poem is written in the form of a fairy tale, using several different literary elements to illustrate the narrator’s conflicting dilemma. “Once Upon a Time There was a Man” implements metaphor, allusion, and irony to illustrate mankind’s ongoing predicament of living up to peer expectations.

                “Once Upon a Time There was a Man” makes use of an extended metaphor to demonstrate the theme of self versus expectation. Lines 1 and 2 state, “Once upon a time there was, there was a man / who lived inside me wearing this cold armour.” Of course, there is not literally a knight living inside the narrator. Instead, this is a metaphor for the gallant and detached sort of person that other people expect him to be. Portraying this ideal person as a knight exemplifies the unreachable perfection that the narrator feels he will never live up to. Line 3 says, “The kind of knight of whom the ladies could be proud,” and line 11 states, “The drums, declared his mastery.” These lines both contain metaphors for the outside expectation the narrator feels The knight’s kingdom is counting on him to do great things, and all the people in the land truly believe that he has all the heroic traits a knight should have, just as the people who surround the narrator have faith in him to achieve perfection, even though he does not believe he can. The narrator uses this metaphor of a fairytale knight in order to better explain his peers’ expectations.

            Using the example of the knight, “Once Upon a Time There was a Man” also uses fairytale and King Arthur allusions to further exemplify the theme of living up to impossibly high expectations. As a whole, the description of the knight, as well as the title, allude to fairytales and the classic stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table that every child is familiar with growing up. Arthur’s knights are known for their courage, courtesy, and honor. In the poem, the narrator’s knight fought infidels and dragons, delivered favors through dark forests, and dined with kings (lines 5-8). These actions make the knight seem brave, courteous, and honorable, much like the Knights of the Round Table. This allusion depicts the knight as the perfect hero of fairytales and legends, which only adds to the narrator’s belief that he will never measure up to such a high standard. In addition, the title of the poem, “Once Upon a Time There was a Man,” alludes to the cliché opening sentence of many fairytales. In fairytales, this beginning often sets up an idealistic story about the heroic prince who saves the damsel in distress from an evil witch, dragon, prince, etc, whereupon the live happily ever after, the end. Because the poem is titled like the opening of a classic fairytale where the hero always defeats the monster and wins the girl, it is again setting up for the theme of impossible expectations and flawed reality.

The fairytale style of this poem has an ironic twist. Instead of achieving victory in every aspect of his existence, the knight’s flawed nature is discovered in line 20 with two effective words: “He fled.” After glimpsing the moon through the trees, the knight retreats, showing the imperfections he kept hidden from the rest of the kingdom (lines 19-20). This sudden variation from the allusion created by the rest of the poem is ironic because the sudden turn of events does not fit with the classic notion of the brave and gallant knight. This use of irony exemplifies the narrator’s knowledge that he is incapable of being the ideal person his peers expect him to be.

In conclusion, “Once Upon a Time There was a Man” uses these literary devices to fully explain the theme of living up to impossible standards. Because the poem changes the fairytales that are so well-known, it comments on the idealized perfection of what life *should* be like, rather than what often is an imperfect reality. The knight can be easily understood, as he seems perfect to others, but shows his real self at the end of the poem. Almost all people can identify with this theme, whether they are this misunderstood person, or they look for guidance from someone they believe is perfect. “Once Upon a Time There was a Man” identifies the narrator’s metaphorical knight, along with implementing a classic fairytale style with an ironic twist to fully realize the theme of self versus expectation.

Works Cited

Hammond, Mac. "Poetry 180 - Once upon a Time There Was a Man." *Library of Congress Home*. Web.

10 Dec. 2009. <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/153.html>.

